Several years ago a craftsman with a wry sense of humor spent long hours fabricating a small black box, stark of exterior save for an on-off electrical switch. When the switch was actuated, the lid would rise and a hand would pop out only to turn the switch off. The mechanism thus stopped, the hand would swiftly retract beneath the lid to await a repeat of the preposterous cycle.

Had this gentleman chosen to build an automobile rather than a black box, it is probable that his prototype would have been similar to the 1964 Thunderbird convertible. Because here in four-wheeled form is the embodiment of the strange desire to fabricate an immensely complicated device that in essence does nothing in any practical sense.

To be sure, the T-bird convertible in full plumage is a delightful vehicle and there is little question that inside each man's breast beats the desire to just once climb behind the glistening array of switches, knobs, buttons and lights that compose the Thunderbird's instrument panel. But the fact remains that the car is impossible to define in terms of conventional automotive functions and design concepts.

For example, the Thunderbird convertible might be roughly labeled as a luxury four-place touring car—except that the trunk compartment is stuffed with pistons and motors for operating the top, and luggage space is therefore practically nonexistent. A high-performance machine designed for the sheer fun of going fast? Hardly. The Thunderbird faces life with a mere 300 horsepower to tow around its formidable 4200 pounds, plus drive its galaxy of accessories, and can by no stretch of the imagination be classified as a "hot" 4 seater like the 289 Mustang or the GTO.

The Thunderbird is 205.5 inches of steel and chrome with one purpose; gratification of the ego. Thirty years ago a man approaching middle age took one final stab at delaying his fleeting youth by chucking out his B.V.D.'s and buying new boxer shorts with purple and orange stripes. Today, with looser credit restrictions and expanded middle class horizons, the same man can best satisfy those yearnings by taking the wheel of a 1964 Thunderbird convertible.

It is almost as if James Thurber had been called in to act as a special consultant while planning the Thunderbird dash. He would have understood things like a blinker light that flashes when a door is ajar or a button that snaps the door locks into place. Ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa. . . . Captain Mitty was flying at 35,000 feet. . . .

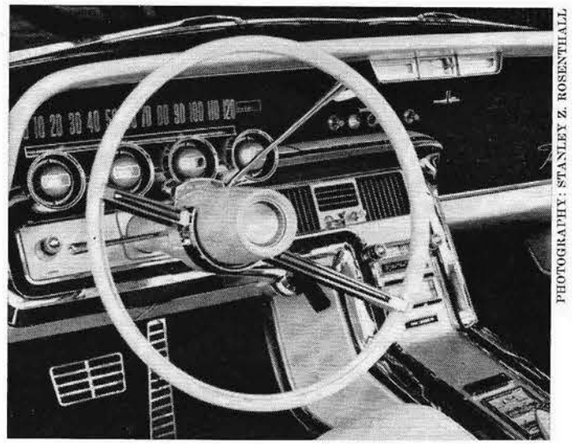
For years it has been the habit of the motoring press to periodically examine the Thunderbird and by reflex register shock and outrage that Ford would have the effrontery to market such a vehicle. These howls of protest have been authored by individuals largely ignorant of the fact that millions of customers exist who would any day of the week select overt pizazz in favor of proper steering, gearboxes and handling. Only when the Thunderbird is considered as a massive assault in achieving all that is frivolous and Mittyesque in a motor car, can it be evaluated realistically—and enjoyed for what it is.

The Thunderbird is one of few automobiles that truly requires a study of the instruction book before getting underway. Should this step be ignored, the first miles are spent in agonized wonderment over what all those blinking lights might be trying to tell you. Forewarned, you will know that the alarms are of a routine nature; i.e. your fuel is low, your roadside warning blinkers are operating, your seatbelt is not fastened or you have a door ajar. The good little book will save you from such torment.

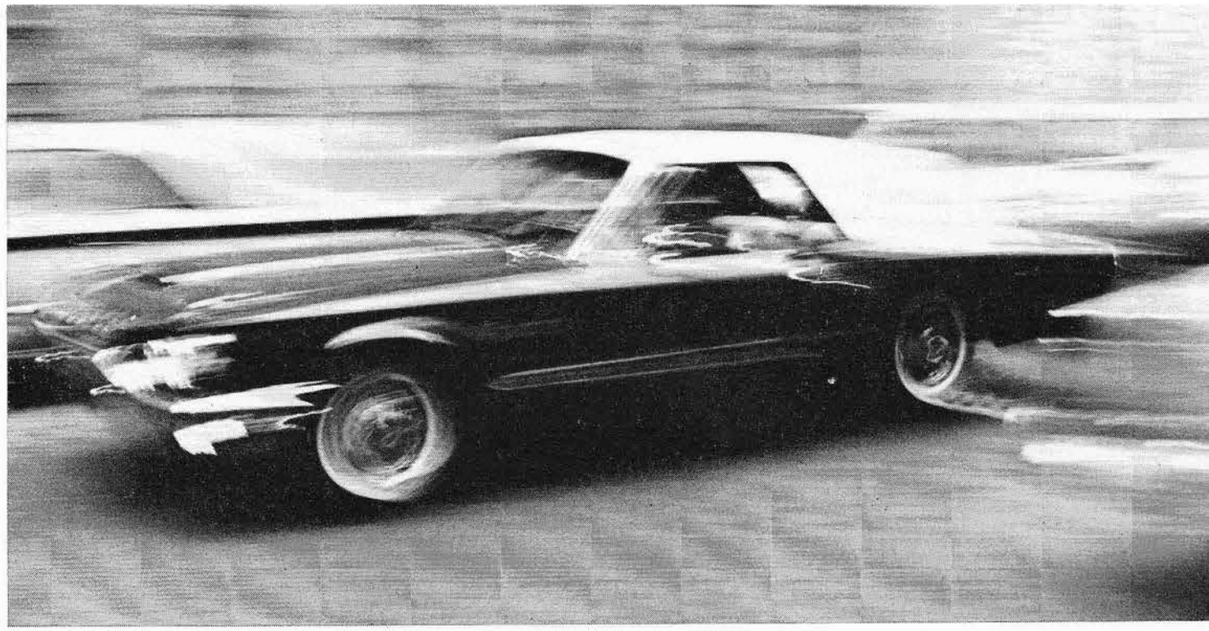
CAR and DRIVER ROAD TEST

THUNDERBIRD CONVERTIBLE

Who wants a Thunderbird? Every last Walter Mitty in the entire United States, that's who wants a Thunderbird!



PHOTOGRAPHY: STANLEY Z. ROSENTHALL



For our test, Ford Motor Company provided us with a Thunderbird equipped with a complete portfolio of gadgets, including real wire wheels. In deep metallic green, with white top, the machine created an imposing sight and elicited cheers from small boys wherever it was driven.

Loping down an expressway at 70 mph is really very pleasant in a Thunderbird convertible. Wind noise is minimal beneath a particularly well fabricated top and one cannot help but feel satisfaction from the envious homage paid by the proletarian motorists as you whisk past.

The bucket seats are extremely comfortable and provide particularly good support across the shoulders, though six-footers may lament the fact that another two inches of travel are not available.

Ford has taken great pains to give the Thunderbird a boulevard ride and, on the turnpike, their efforts seem to be eminently successful. For straight-line travel over smooth surfaces it is properly silent and stable, but less favorable conditions reveal a shockingly flabby front end and awesome quantities of understeer. Even by returning to our original premise that a nutty car like the Thunderbird is neither obligated or designed to provide really first-rate handling, the car's clumsiness cannot be entirely overlooked. The soft suspension and unusually flexible body construction make any change of direction, even passing a car, an unpleasant adventure. The handling is reminiscent of prewar Packards and that, with all of the suspension advances that have come about in recent years, is inexcusable in a contemporary vehicle.

The power brakes tended to grab on the Bird we tested and caused various staff members to turn routine reductions of speed into horrendous panic stops. One tester was cruising down a vacant six-lane turnpike when he spotted a police car stopped on the roadside ahead. As he touched the brakes to reach a legal speed, he managed to lock up all four wheels and heralded his approach to the parked lawmen with a lusty yelp from the skidding tires.

The white vinyl lip of the overhanging dash casts an irritating reflection in any sort of daylight, and night driving is slightly complicated by the ever-present image of the lighted automatic transmission selector panel looming in the windshield. It is significant that this device is not placed as one might expect on the "console" but conventionally on the steering column. No, Ford isn't trying to fake anyone into the notion that this is a sporting vehicle, and for that they are to be congratulated.

Once the driver acclimates himself with the 21st century world of the cockpit and resolves that he won't try anything smart in the way of turning corners or changing speed, riding around in a 1964 Thunderbird can be gratifying. The overall quality of the automobile appears to be fine and certainly befits a product that costs as much as it does. The temperature control is excellent and without question ranks with anything in the industry. Once the myriad of controls are deciphered, the air conditioning goes about its job with silent efficiency, cooling the cockpit with a minimum of swirling air currents. When the fact that our car had a soft top is considered, the unit's design becomes all the more impressive.

One cannot help but ponder the massive outlay of cash that must be involved in maintaining a vehicle of this sort once it becomes so old that some of the insanely complicated gadgets begin to wear out. But this should be an academic question for anyone seriously considering the purchase of a Thunderbird. Such practical considerations have no relationship to the problem because one either has the money to spend or one doesn't—and if such things as maintenance costs and gas mileage are a concern, one shouldn't be buying such a car in the first place.

But if your handicap has gone up three strokes in the past year and your secretary just snickers when you try to be sweetly dangerous, there may be a solution to the whole thing at your local Ford dealer. You see there's this fascinating button on the dashboard that you press and by golly. C/D

SPECIFICATIONS OVERLEAF

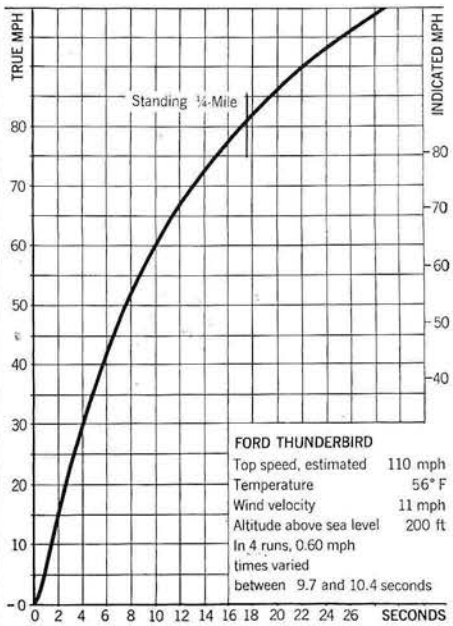
FORD THUNDERBIRD

Manufacturer: Ford Division, Ford Motor Co.
20,000 Rotunda Drive,
Dearborn, Michigan

Price as tested: $5494.80

ACCELERATION

Zero to	Seconds
30 mph	3.9
40 mph	5.6
50 mph	7.6
60 mph	10.0
70 mph	13.2
80 mph	17.0
90 mph	22.0
100 mph	30.0
Standing ¼-mile	81.5 mph in 17.7



ENGINE

Water-cooled V-8, cast iron block, 5 main bearings
Bore x stroke ..... 4.05 x 3.78 in, 104 x 96 mm
Displacement ..... 390 cu in, 6396 cc
Compression ratio ..... 10.8 to one
Carburetion. Single four-throat Ford C4SF-9510B
Valve gear. . Pushrod-operated overhead valves, hydraulic lifters.
Power (SAE) ..... 300 bhp @ 4600 rpm
Torque ..... 427 lbs-ft @ 2800 rpm
Specific power output ..... 0.77 bhp per cu in, 47 bhp per liter
Usable range of engine speeds ... 600-5000 rpm
Electrical system .... 12-volt, 65 amp-hr battery, alternator
Fuel recommended ..... Premium
Mileage ..... 10-17 mpg
Range on 21-gallon tank ..... 210-310 miles

DRIVE TRAIN

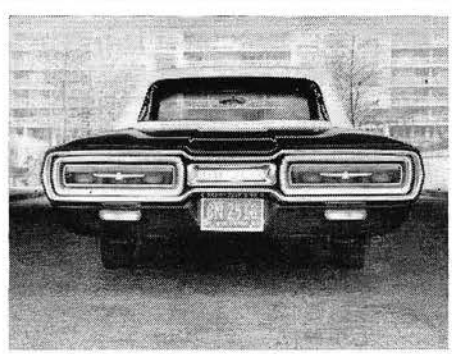
Clutch ..... Cruise-O-Matic hydraulic torque converter, max multiplication 2.10 to one (at stall).
Transmission ..... 3-speed planetary

Gear	Ratio	Over-all	Max mph/ 1000 rpm	Max mph
Rev	2.00	6.00	–11.0	– 55
1st	2.40	7.20	9.2	46
2nd	1.47	4.41	15.0	71
3rd	1.00	3.00	22.0	110

Final drive ratio ..... 3.00 to one

CHASSIS

Unit-construction, all-steel body.
Wheelbase ..... 113.2 in
Track ..... F 61 R 60 in
Length ..... 205.5 in
Width ..... 77 in
Height ..... 52.5 in
Ground clearance ..... 5.5 in
Dry weight ..... 3860 lbs
Curb weight ..... 3910 lbs
Test weight ..... 4200 lbs
Weight distribution front/rear 56/44
Pounds per bhp (test weight) 14.0
Suspension: F Ind., unequal-length wishbones and coil springs.
R Rigid axle and semi-elliptic leaf springs.
Brakes ..... 11-in drums front and rear, 234 sq in swept area
Steering ..... Recirculating ball, power assist (20.4 to one ratio).
Turns, lock to lock 4½
Turning circle ..... 40 ft
Tires ..... 8.15 x 15
Revs per mile 754



CHECK LIST

ENGINE

Starting ..... Excellent
Response ..... Fair
Noise ..... Good
Vibration ..... Excellent

DRIVE TRAIN

Clutch action ..... —
Transmission linkage ..... —
Synchromesh action ..... —
Power-to-ground transmission ..... Poor

BRAKES

Response ..... Poor
Pedal pressure ..... Poor
Fade resistance ..... Poor
Smoothness ..... Poor
Directional stability ..... Fair

STEERING

Response ..... Poor
Accuracy ..... Fair
Feedback ..... Poor
Road feel ..... Fair

SUSPENSION

Harshness control ..... Good
Roll stiffness ..... Poor
Tracking ..... Poor
Pitch control ..... Poor
Shock damping ..... Fair

CONTROLS

Location ..... Good
Relationship ..... Good
Small controls ..... Good

INTERIOR

Visibility ..... Excellent
Instrumentation ..... Good
Lighting ..... Excellent
Entry/exit ..... Good
Front seating comfort ..... Excellent
Front seating room ..... Good
Rear seating comfort ..... Good
Rear seating room ..... Fair
Storage space ..... Fair
Wind noise ..... Excellent
Road noise ..... Good

WEATHER PROTECTION

Heater ..... Very good
Defroster ..... Very good
Ventilation ..... Excellent
Weather sealing ..... Good
Windshield wiper action ..... Good

QUALITY CONTROL

Materials, exterior ..... Good
Materials, interior ..... Good
Exterior finish ..... Excellent
Interior finish ..... Excellent
Hardware and trim ..... Excellent

GENERAL

Service accessibility ..... Fair
Luggage space ..... Unacceptable
Bumper protection ..... Poor
Exterior lighting ..... Excellent
Resistance to crosswinds ..... Good